

## **Aid Fund Claims of the Pennsylvania Conference: Resume and Decision**

*by Francis T. Tagg<sup>1</sup> and George R. Brown<sup>2</sup>, 1910*

The question at issue between the New York and Pennsylvania Conferences is one that dates back far into the past and is not easy to adjust. The conditions under which it occurred are known to few, and the data for accurate judgment have largely passed into forgetfulness and oblivion. The persons who took an actual part in it have all gone to their reward. What is left is a confused mass of material, difficult to put together in an intelligent form because so many connecting links are missing. These materials we have carefully gone over and examined with the greatest care, and we have reached the following conclusions as the result of our investigations. A resume of the history of the case will help us to see the reasonableness of our verdict, which we have reached without bias or favoritism to either party.

The slavery question had been agitating the two sections of the Methodist Protestant Church; the North and West taking the position that slavery was an evil which the church should not tolerate, and which it was bound to oppose and condemn, and the word "white" in the Discipline, which denied the colored man equal privileges in church membership, was not only an offense to colored people, but contrary to the Word of God, and therefore should be stricken out.

The South, including the Maryland Conference, took the position that any church deliverance on the slavery question would cause immediate friction in the South, and end in the alienation of that entire section from the Methodist Protestant Church; and, therefore, the proper policy of the church was an attitude of silence and inaction. But it was not considered a matter of policy, but of conscience, in the anti-slavery states, and therefore silence and inaction was impossible.

This sentiment became more acute with each recurring General Conference until 1857, when provision was made for an informal convention in Cincinnati of all the anti-slavery conferences, with a view to suspension of relations, unless the next General Conference should revoke its former action, and make a deliverance on the question that would satisfy the North and West. As this was not done, the suspension of relations with the Methodist Protestant Church speedily followed. The first General Convention of the new organization, subsequently known as "The Methodist Church," was held at Springfield, Ohio, in 1858.<sup>3</sup> In it nineteen annual conferences were represented, with forty-four delegates.

Now the point that is fundamental in this history is this: the anti-slavery conferences all joined in this action which ended in the formation of the Methodist Church. Among them were both the Pennsylvania and New York Conferences. It is true that the names of J.K. Helmbold<sup>4</sup> and William Dale<sup>5</sup>

appear as delegates to the General Conference of the Methodist Protestant Church in 1858, but the minutes show that they were absent – and made no report to the conference by letter or otherwise. On the other hand, the minutes of the General Convention of the Methodist Church show that both the Pennsylvania and the New York Conferences were represented in the convention of 1857 and in the subsequent convention in 1858. Then again both conferences were represented in the Methodist Convention at Pittsburgh in 1860, and in the convention in Cincinnati in 1862 – after which the union of the two annual conferences was agreed upon by the commissions which each had appointed.

This was the union of two annual conferences of the Methodist Church, formed after a commission from each had duly considered the matter and reported favorably thereon – and both conferences had, by a majority vote, adopted the report of the commission. These two conferences having been recognized as constituent parts of the Methodist Church, and as in full affiliation with it, were now by this union ONE conference in the Methodist Church. This action was considered and approved at the subsequent General Convention of the Methodist Church.

The vote of the Pennsylvania Conference, according to the minutes, was 17 to 11 in favor of the union. The Pennsylvania Conference was at that time reported to have had 9 churches, 2 parsonages, and church property valued at \$25,000 – and a Preacher's Aid Fund of \$550.00, most of which was taken into the New York Conference after the majority had voted for the union. Those who voted against the union withdrew from the conference, went to an adjoining village, and organized a new body which they called "The Pennsylvania Conference of the Methodist Protestant Church." By their own action, the two conferences had previously made themselves an integral part of the Methodist Church. All their preachers, churches, parsonages, as well as all their invested funds for church purposes, belonged to and were the property of the Methodist Church. The union of the two conferences did not change the relation of the preachers, property, or vested interests to the denomination of which both formed a part. They were all Methodists – and not Methodist Protestants.

Now when the men, who were to all intents and purposes members of the Methodist Church, withdrew from the body that united itself with the New York Conference by a majority vote, and organized a Methodist Protestant conference at Hollisterville, they went to another denomination and thereby left behind them (and lost) all their rights, claims and interests – including all vested funds. Had they gone to the Methodist Episcopal, the Baptist or the Presbyterian Church, the claim for churches or vested rights would not have been raised.

Indeed this was a secession from the denomination to which they belonged – and if the New York Conference had chosen to institute suits, it could have recovered all the property that the withdrawing members took with them. Courts have frequently passed upon this phase of the subject, and the decision has always been in favor of the plaintiffs. Certainly the Hollisterville conference had no claims on the vested interests, which by a majority vote of the Pennsylvania

Conference of the Methodist Church had been merged with the interests of the New York Conference. This is not only good law, but it is so fundamental as a principle that no church interest would be safe without it. In seeking some legal information on this point, an eminent and disinterested lawyer emphatically sustained this view.

The fact that there was a subsequent union of these two denominations, by which all again became Methodist Protestants, does not affect the principle stated above, nor the conclusions reached therefrom. When the union of the Pennsylvania and New York Conferences occurred, both were duly recognized parts of the Methodist Church. When they became Methodist Protestants, they brought with them all their preachers, members, churches, parsonages, and vested funds. If part of the New York Conference had refused to go with their brethren into this union, and set up an independent Methodist Conference, it would be monstrous to assume that they could have retained their part of the church property and their vested funds. The newly organized Pennsylvania Conference of the Methodist Protestant Church came into the union on the same terms and brought all they had with them.

Our conclusions are clear: that the present Pennsylvania Conference is a comparatively new organization dating from the Hollisterville conference – and cannot therefore lay claim to any vested funds held under authority of the Methodist Church or any conference thereof. It ceased to be a conference of the Methodist Protestant Church when it sent its representatives to the Convention and sought recognition as part of the Methodist Church. Those who refused to concur with the will of the majority in uniting with the New York Conference and withdrew to form a conference under the auspices and authority of another denomination forfeited every right, title, claim and ownership in the ministry, property and vested funds of the body from which they separated.

Had the men who organized the Hollisterville conference set up another annual conference in the Methodist Church, they might have been justified, in equity, to lay claims to some of the vested fund – but going to another church, or denomination, was to surrender all claims in the denomination from which they withdrew, or any conference therein. The amount claimed is too small for any contention, but the fact that the men who helped to create and enlarge the fund and went into the New York Conference became the beneficiaries proves that it was in no sense misappropriated nor diverted from its original intent.

The total amount involved is only \$550.00, and in the most supreme interpretation of the equities of the case, the seceding portion of the conference could claim only a little more than one-third of this amount, or to be exact, \$193.12. But even this cannot be conceded as a right. The 17 who voted for the union helped to create and increase this fund, and they certainly did not surrender their claim, nor lose the rights to the benefits of the fund, by voting in favor of union. Such unions have taken place in the Methodist Protestant Church even in recent years, and some such unions are now being arranged for, but the uniting

parties merge their interests, and no seceding members could hope to alienate them from the uniting bodies.

If the two bodies unite as they ought to do<sup>6</sup>, unite and not merely come together, there will be no reason to quibble over a mere sentiment, especially as they will share equally, all and alike, in the interests of the united body. And when they get to Heaven they will wonder how they ever could have thought of fussing over a thing so insignificant for nearly half a century. The sentiment of union is so much more sweet and beautiful that you can well bury this whole business forever – and never give Satan another chance to resurrect it while the sun shines and while God continues to bless his children for what they do, and not for what they fight about. The principle involved is clear, and we have sought to state it clearly, but the thing itself is not going to lessen anybody's breakfast nor multiply anybody's bank account.

F.T. Tagg

G.R. Brown

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<sup>1</sup> Francis Thomas Tagg (1845-1923) was a respected minister and churchman of the Maryland Conference of the Methodist Protestant Church. He served as editor of that denomination's *Methodist Protestant* publication from 1893 until his retirement in 1916.

<sup>2</sup> George Rowland Brown (1867-1952) was a prominent Methodist Protestant minister and administrator. In 1910 he was a former president (the chief officers in the MP church were presidents, and not bishops) of the West Virginia Conference serving as the vice-president of the Executive Committee of the MP denomination. Following the 1939 union with the Methodist Episcopal bodies, Brown served for a quadrennium on the Judicial Council of the Methodist Church.

<sup>3</sup> Part of the confusion regarding this disputed pension fund in particular and the 1858-1877 split in general is whether the Methodist Church was indeed a separate denomination or merely the northern section of the Methodist Protestant Church. The split group operated for several years under the name "Methodist Protestant Church" before becoming the "Methodist Church." John Scott Jr of the Pittsburgh Conference was one of the group's most prominent and influential leaders. At the last General Conference (1875) of the dissident conferences from the north and the west, Methodist Protestant historian E.J. Drinkhouse reports (vol. II, page 540) that "Dr. John Scott offered resolutions, which were adopted, redeclaring, as at former General Conventions and Conferences, in substance that the Methodist Church was not a new Church, but 'that it is substantially the Methodist Protestant Church.'"

<sup>4</sup> Rev. Joseph Kemmerer Helmbold Jr (1820-1891) was a printer, pastor, Civil War Captain and lecturer. The latter part of his life, he lived at Daleville. His son William Christmas Helmbold (born 12/24/1870) was an MP preacher in Michigan. J.K. Helmbold was one of the persons who led the re-formation of the Pennsylvania Conference of the Methodist Protestant Church at the Hollisterville Conference referred to later in this paper. In general, south-central Pennsylvania was part of the Maryland Conference of the MP Church. Helmbold was originally a member of that Conference and served Trough Creek (1844-45), Newport (1845-46), Juniata (1846-47), Huntingdon (1847-48), Concord (1848-49), Clearfield (1849-50), Cecil MD (1850-53) and Reading (1853-56) before transferring to the Pennsylvania Conference in 1856. While Concord was the only one of these Pennsylvania appointments to survive to the Methodist Union of 1939, this list of appointments shows how extensive the Methodist Protestant work once was in the mid-state.

<sup>5</sup> William Dale was also originally a member of the Maryland Conference who later transferred to the Pennsylvania Conference.

<sup>6</sup> This report was created in preparation for the impending merger of the Pennsylvania and New York Conferences to form the Eastern Conference in 1911.